

School Meal Programs

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Issue

Explain how (1) the federal school meal programs operate, including state and local responsibilities, and (2) students may qualify for free meals.

Summary

The Food and Nutrition Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the [National School Lunch Program](#) (NSLP) and the [School Breakfast Program](#) (SBP) at the federal level. These programs provide healthy meals at low cost or no cost to school children. Public and private schools that participate in the programs receive federal cash subsidies for each reimbursable meal they serve (i.e., meals meeting federal nutritional requirements) through the administering state agency.

Individual students may be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals based upon either income-based eligibility or categorical eligibility (e.g., participation in a federal assistance program). An entire student body of a school or district may be eligible for free school meals if the school or district (1) participates in the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a categorical eligibility program, or (2) is in a state that has appropriated funds to provide universal free meals to all students.

Federal School Meal Programs

Operations

SBP and NSLP are federally assisted meal programs operating in public schools, nonprofit private schools, and residential child care institutions. They provide nutritionally balanced low- or no-cost

meals to children each school day. At the state level, state agencies administer the programs through agreements with school food authorities.

Funding

Participating school districts and independent schools receive cash subsidies and USDA foods for each reimbursable meal they serve. In exchange, participating institutions must serve lunches that meet federal meal pattern requirements and offer the lunches at a free or reduced price to eligible children.

Free Meals for Students

School districts must determine whether a household's students are eligible for free or reduced price meals under the federal programs either through (1) an income-based application process at or around the beginning of the school year or at the time of enrollment or (2) direct certification (i.e., automatic enrollment based upon notification from a state or local agency). Once a determination of free or reduced-priced meal eligibility is made, the student retains that status through the remainder of the school year and into the first 30 operating days of the subsequent school year or until a new determination is made in the subsequent school year, whichever comes first ([7 C.F.R. § 245.6\(c\)](#)).

A school or district may serve free meals to the entire student body if it (1) participates in CEP or (2) is in a state that has elected to fund universal free meals for all students.

Income-Based Eligibility by Application

Households may [apply](#) for students to receive free or reduced-price meals based upon income. Determining local officials (those designated by the school to review and approve applications) compare the student's household size and the total household gross income to the applicable federal Income Eligibility Guidelines ([7 C.F.R. § 245.3](#)). The Secretary of Agriculture annually sets these family-size income levels (see [School Meals - Income Eligibility Guidelines](#)).

Categorical Eligibility by Direct Certification

If a student or any household member participates in the following federal governmental assistance programs, they are categorically (i.e., automatically) eligible for free or reduced-price lunch: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations; or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, if the state program meets federal standards. Students are also categorically eligible if they are (1) a homeless, runaway, or migrant child; (2) a foster child; or (3) enrolled in a federally funded Head Start or

comparable State- or Indian Tribal Organization-funded Head Start or pre-kindergarten program ([7 C.F.R. § 245.2](#)).

Categorically eligible students become eligible through direct certification, based on documentation obtained directly from the appropriate state or local agency or individuals authorized to certify that the student is a member of a household receiving assistance or participating in one of the above programs. These students do not have to submit a household application; however, if they do, then direct certification would take precedence ([7 C.F.R. §§ 245.2 & 245.6\(b\)](#)).

Community Eligibility Provision

The federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 created [CEP](#), which allows eligible schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students without collecting applications from individual households ([P.L. 111-296](#), § 104; [7 C.F.R. § 245.9\(f\)](#)). Instead, schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on their percentage of enrolled students who are categorically eligible for free meals because they participate in other specific means-tested programs, such as SNAP and TANF (this percentage is known as the identified student percentage (ISP)). Broadly speaking, schools or districts may use CEP if at least 25% of their enrolled students are categorically eligible.

Within a school district, all schools, a group of schools, or an individual school may participate in CEP if eligible. Eligible schools and school districts must submit required documentation to their state education agency (in Connecticut, this is the State Department of Education (SDE)). The USDA maintains a central [webpage](#) with links to most states' CEP instructions for school districts.

States must annually publish by May 1 a list of eligible schools and districts (i.e., those with ISPs of at least 25%) and near-eligible schools and districts (i.e., those with ISPs between 15% and just under 25%) ([7 C.F.R. § 245.9\(f\)\(7\)](#)). (These percentage thresholds [recently took effect on October 26, 2023](#). Prior to this date, schools and districts needed an ISP of 40% to be eligible and between 30% and just under 40% to be near-eligible.)

The most recent list of the Connecticut schools approved to participate in CEP ([2022-23 school year](#)) can be found on SDE's CEP reporting [webpage](#). Although the entire state does not participate in CEP, all public and private school food authorities of NSLP and SBP must annually submit CEP eligibility data to SDE. For the 2023-24 school year, the eligible participants under the new 25% ISP rule are listed [here](#).

Universal Free Meals

For the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, the USDA offered free school meals to all children as a temporary initiative to assist with school re-openings during the pandemic, not as a permanent replacement of CEP. Beginning in the 2022-23 school year the USDA discontinued the initiative, and free meals for all students reverted to the income-based application and categorical eligibility processes.

Some states, however, have passed legislation to continue the universal free meals initiative with state funding. At the time of this report's publication, at least eight states have passed legislation to make free meals permanently available to all students: [California](#), [Colorado](#), [Maine](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Michigan](#), [Minnesota](#), [New Mexico](#), and [Vermont](#).

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